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The psychic life of gentrification: Mapping desire and resentment in the gentrifying city

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Abstract

Following the lead of artists and scholars in Black, feminist, psychoanalytic, and queer studies and geographies, this special issue and editorial call for greater scholarly attention to the conscious and unconscious emotional, psychic, and affective dimensions of urban gentrification. While geographical scholarship frequently gestures to gentrification as an affective scene, these connections are generally suggested rather than developed. We argue that psychoanalytic and affect theories have richly developed conceptual and explanatory paradigms that can help scholars make sense of the sometimes granular, mundane ways gentrification is both facilitated and contested. Our aim here is not to displace Marxist political economies of gentrification that support a right to the city, a body of work with political stakes that we also claim. Rather, our goal is to supplement political economy's rather focused inquiry into gentrification's 'proper' political-economic dimensions, in the hopes of offering further insight into gentrification's libidinal economies, which are conditioned by racial capitalist social relations but also exceed them.

Keywords

affect, everyday life, gentrification, libidinal economy, psychoanalysis

What can we learn about gentrification by attending to its *psychic life*? While urban geography has been dominated by debates over political economy and cultural explanations of gentrification, a large, heterogeneous body of literature from the arts and humanities has confronted its equally vexing affective, emotional, and unconscious dimensions. Such work has explored the complex ways that the resentment and alienation produced by racial capitalism¹ find specific objects in scenes of neighborhood change²; the differentiated and distributed ways that mutual suspicion and paranoia mete out deadly consequences for the most marginalized urban residents³; the melancholia that remains in the wake of forms of life (quite literally) foreclosed by displacement⁴; the work of anger, attachment, and dissident senses of place in anti-gentrification and anti-eviction politics⁵; and the ambivalence and guilt that haunt well-meaning, often well-educated, gentrifiers, including many urbanists.⁶

Consider Hal Ashby's 1970 comedy, *The Landlord*. Set in the very early years of gentrification in New York, the film tells the story of a young white aristocratic New Yorker who buys a run-down tenement in Park Slope, Brooklyn with the intention of evicting the Black tenants who are behind on the rent and living there himself.⁷ Seemingly in spite of this plan, he also seems genuinely

enamored with the idea of being a good landlord and, in his own way, becoming a part of the community. As the film progresses, the protagonist is, by turns, ridiculed by his tenants, humiliated, befriended, and seduced. He himself acts cluelessly, callously, occasionally thoughtfully, and becomes romantically involved with one of his tenants. The attraction between these two characters, encountering one each other across such a huge gulf of experience and opportunity, is palpable. She likes his sweetness and boyish sincerity, even though she makes clear to him that her loyalty remains to her husband, who is incarcerated. Ashby does not lecture us on the ‘problematic’ space of encounter their romance represents, giving the audience space to watch it unfold and to think about what these characters find in one another. As the African American film critic Steven Boone argues, the film remains transgressive precisely because of the tenderness and patience with which Ashby treats taboo moments like these by seemingly ‘asserting that in a sane, just world, they wouldn’t be taboo at all’.⁸

Throughout the film, we cut to a scene (perhaps a memory) of a classroom in which a teacher asks her pupils: ‘Now children, how do we live?’ This refrain points us towards one of *The Landlord*’s central questions: how to live a good life; a life with pleasures, a life with justice. The protagonist is a naïve, privileged young man making faltering attempts to live such a life; one different from that of his arch-conservative father and well-meaning but nevertheless racist mother. The film succeeds in providing a space to think about what is psychically at play in gentrification for both the gentrifier and the gentrified. In an echo of so many colonial narratives, the young landlord’s search for a life of his own takes him to a ‘foreign’ land, a place already inhabited by a politicized and increasingly confident Black community. On the tenants’ side, the film meditates on their anger towards the protagonist – both for the things he does and for the slights they’ve suffered from people who look like him – as well as the tenants’ desires for him: as a lover, as a foil for jokes, and as an object of derision. Through all of this, Ashby gives us a sense of the rich psychic landscape of gentrification, of everything that people bring to it and the fantasies that play out in it.

Alongside *The Landlord*, we take inspiration from recent works like Tim Lawrence’s *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor*, with its account of the creative freedom in the multiracial and sexually polymorphous downtown art and music scene of the early 1980s; from the spaces of cross-race, cross-class sexual contact described in Samuel Delany’s classic *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* – which one could read as a description of the erotics of a neighborhood in the heady, early days of gentrification when new people are arriving but the old have not been driven out.⁹ Or ‘Google Google Apps Apps’, a music video by San Francisco drag queen Persia and multimedia performance group Daddies Plastik, which both condemns tech-driven gentrification in the San Francisco Bay and remaps it on explicitly erotic terms: ‘Techies! Take the Mission! Techies! Gentrify me, gentrify me, gentrify my love’.¹⁰ Or filmmaker Ira Sachs’ *Little Men*, with its story of two young boys whose friendship blossoms across the gulf between the Manhattan intellectual elite and working-class Brooklyn, only for it to be terminated when one boy’s parents evict the other’s.¹¹

In *Gentrification of the Mind*, Sarah Schulman argues that gentrification is a homogenizing force intellectually as well as culturally: ‘this smoothing over and pushing out... profoundly affects how we think. That then creates what we think we feel’.¹² Our emotional lives are connected to our ability to think complexity, she argues, and this ability to think feeds back into what we *feel* about

these processes. Geographers, urban planners, and community organizers have long debated how best to understand topologies of complicity and resistance in gentrification and how to locate horizons for ethical and political change.¹³ Yet geographical scholarship on gentrification has only rarely theorized such affectivity using the powerful conceptual vocabularies and tools that social theorists have developed to make sense of the imbrication of emotional and social life: affect theory and psychoanalysis.¹⁴ Terms central to gentrification debates such as ‘displacement’, ‘integration’, and ‘resistance’, have long histories in psychoanalytic and affective theorizing, for example, but with a few exceptions, these connections have been suggested rather than developed.

Scholars in Black studies, gender studies, queer studies, and their cognate geographical subfields have in some respects led the way in attending to the everyday affective dimensions of gentrification. Consider Kemi Adeyemi’s fine-grained study of Black queer nightlife, especially among Black queer women, in Chicago’s Logan Square, where a long history of Latinx community formation contends with the onset of white ‘bro’ hipsterdom.¹⁵ In sustained, critical dialogue with David Harvey’s work on the right to the city, Adeyemi shows what gets lost in an exclusive turn to ‘codified, class-based organizations such as Occupy and landless rights movements’ and ‘away from desire and affect as sufficiently political’.¹⁶ Adeyemi continues:

‘Harvey’s sometimes-utopian longings for radical change benefit from more-nuanced analysis of the microgestures of dissent and reformation that communities of color, and black communities in particular, have long practiced—often in ways that demonstrate fundamental ambivalences in their relationships to, and thus their understandings of the potential overhaul of, systems of capitalism. Certainly, black queer women strive to change and reinvent the city after their own hearts’ desires, as Harvey writes; it just happens in perhaps less intelligible and codified, but no less powerful, ways of moving the body’.¹⁷

Black queer women’s small gestures at queer slow jam nights in gentrifying neighborhoods – elbowing onto dancefloors, refusing unwanted stares and solicitations to dance or converse – might not register as ‘properly’ revolutionary, but for Adeyemi, they speak to ‘strategies of remaining’ in urban spaces that both desire and displace working class, black, feminine, and queer forms of life.¹⁸ Work like Adeyemi’s, which does not dismiss but vitally supplements Harvey’s political-economic account, inspires more granular attention to the mundane affectivity of gentrification.

Alongside the familiar emotional repertoire that we are used to hearing about in gentrification scholarship – the naked hostility or liberal guilt of the gentrifier and the righteous anger of the displaced – what other emotional landscapes lurk in the cross-cultural encounter of gentrification? What might we say about the *desire for the other* that is plainly evident among many gentrifiers, not all of whom are desperate to eradicate the communities they gentrify? And what about *the attraction to the gentrifier*, who might bring with them strange and exciting bohemian lifestyles, culture, art, and sexual practices, which expand the range of possible lives for working class kids? Like sex, gentrification eroticizes power relations. As anyone who’s had sex knows, power relations are not simply a source of oppression, they are also erotic, in ways that only sometimes neatly coincide with our most conscientious political analyses. Psychoanalytic perspectives remind us that the unconscious is irrational and amoral, a social space both shaped by social relations and irreducible to them.¹⁹

Of all the emotions, ambivalence is perhaps the exemplar we want to call attention to in gentrification. The psychoanalytic version of the dialectic (depending on one's interpretation), ambivalence describes the coexistence of opposing impulses, which persist alongside one another without annulling each other or being capable of being resolved. Ambivalence describes the ways that love and hate, desire and repulsion, can operate simultaneously: for example, how gentrifiers can at the same moment love and desire the culture of the people they are displacing and resent and despise it. Ambivalence exists above all in the unconscious and is most apparent in fantasy. We might ask, therefore, what fantasies play out in gentrification: gentrifiers' fantasies of identification with the other, fantasies of journeying to a hostile place and mastering it, or fantasies of incorporating or becoming the other. In this way, gentrification has parallels with colonialism, another cross-cultural encounter marked by inequalities of power. Postcolonial theory has spent a great deal of time thinking through ambivalence and power: the ways that people travel to other cultures with conflicting desires and hostile impulses about them. And, of course, even in those instances when a *desire* for the other is more obvious than hostility towards them, desiring the other does not resolve the problems of the encounter: it is possible to both have a sincere love for one's new neighbors and neighborhood, *and* to nevertheless exoticize and devalue them. Thus in her important book on the racial aesthetics of gentrification and Black displacement and resistance in Washington, DC, Brandi Thompson Summers points to instances when the presence of Black people, and aesthetic markers of Blackness, are 'now valued as visible evidence of diversity – even by those who describe the area as sketchy or “a dead zone”'.²⁰ And Jen Jack Giesecking's excellent study of lesbian, dyke, and queer community formation in New York tells stories of how desires for a lesbian neighborhood must reckon with the violent constraints of racial capitalism, which often positions white queers as frontline gentrifiers. Giesecking troubles the already “ambivalent relationship with territory accumulation through property ownership and consumption” that he and many of his interview subjects express.²¹

Building on such work, our hope is that this special issue makes space for thinking about gentrification in ways that can enrich our sense of its psychic life and libidinal economy. Psychoanalytic literary scholar Eric L. Santner writes that to allow for the neighbor's self-incoherence and unconscious ambivalence is to offer an ethical response ‘at the heart of our very aliveness to the world’.²² Here we have sought to bring together scholarship that zooms in on the fraught *aliveness* of forms of life in gentrifying cities.²³ Following scholars who have argued that sustained attention to forms of affective life is key to developing better maps of how ideology works in the present, this special issue convenes sustained analyses of the affectivity of neoliberal ideologies as they materialize in gentrifying spaces.²⁴ In other words, what does gentrification *feel like*, and what occasions these feelings? What might the range of differently situated actors in ordinary, fraught scenes of gentrification and displacement need to claim or disavow in order to feel coherent, righteous, innocent, possible, or safe? And how could becoming more articulate about such feelings – conscious and unconscious – inform ethics and politics in and against the neoliberal city? Our objective here is not simply to generate a catalogue of affects that accompany gentrification, or a new DSM for the pathologies of urban change. Neither is our point to merely supplement negative emotions with positive ones – goodness knows that gentrification does not need any more cheerleaders. Our hope is that this special issue demonstrates how attention to the feelings, thoughts, fantasies, and affects associated with gentrification shed some additional light

on what is happening in it – as well as how things might be otherwise, in ways both grand and granular.

Thus, Myung In Ji mounts a psychoanalytic challenge to ‘cultural’ explanations of gentrification and debates over authenticity in gentrifying neighborhoods in Seoul, South Korea. Drawing on Lacan’s account of desire and the other, Ji proposes a novel account of authenticity in urban place-making, one that goes beyond critiques of authenticity as based in elite consumption practices, by examining gentrifiers’ desires for ‘authentic selves’. She argues that such identities are achieved not by assuming a position of objectifying distance relative to the other – as is often posited in ‘critical’ accounts of gentrification – but through complex processes of identification with the fantasized authentic other of the neighborhood. In desiring authenticity, gentrifiers seek not to displace the other, but to preserve them as fantasmatic objects more authentic than themselves.

Moving from Asia to Europe, Sara Westin offers a case study in the alienating, psychical work of language in pro-gentrification housing policy, examining the context of Sweden’s neoliberalizing, but vestigially social-democratic, political economy. Westin demonstrates how pro-market economic policymakers decontextualize and weaponize the language of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, depicting the working-class residents who benefit from rent regulation as greedy, privileged ‘insiders’. She rightly condemns this unethical rhetorical move for ignoring working-class people’s lived attachments to place.

Susanne Frank presents a case of urban renewal, in which the formally industrial city of Dortmund, Germany is attempting to reinvent itself as a globally-connected tech-hub. Frank’s analysis calls attention to the polyvalence of gentrification – how the concept is used to understand the social and affective experience of inequality, even when actual, material displacement is absent. Drawing on Freud and Butler, Frank proposes the idea of ‘neighborhood melancholy’ as a way of accounting for the ambivalence of long-time residents who are simultaneously excited about renewed investment in their neighborhood as well as bitter and saddened by the way its industrial past is stigmatized and used as a foil against which the new is measured.

In the Americas, Dugan Meyer takes up the problematic of policing in gentrifying neighborhoods in Los Angeles, examining what he calls the ‘affective economy’ of civil gang injunctions – a fluid and capacious legal mechanism for controlling racialized bodies in space. Noting that anti-gang injunctions are most commonly employed in rapidly-gentrifying neighborhoods rather than those experiencing the most violent crime, Meyer argues that such security projects are paradoxically invested in *producing* the very objects they defend against. As ‘a dialectic of threat and the *need* for threat’ (this issue) urban security can be understood, he argues, as a symptom in the Lacanian sense: a compromise-formation – stained with *jouissance* – that unites a fear of the other with a disavowed desire for their perceived access to enjoyment.

Jess Linz investigates the devastating and uncanny scene of the 2017 Puebla Earthquake, which occurred on the thirty-second anniversary of the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, in the city’s gentrifying Centro Histórico district. Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant, Linz argues this strange anniversary event produced ‘an *impasse*, or the recognition of a stalemate where business-as-usual cannot continue’ (this issue). Against the appearance of deadlock, Linz shows how residents haunted by the collective memory of 1985 – notably including young people, some

of them gentrifiers themselves, with no conscious memory of the event – organized the neighborhood against a wave of evictions that followed the quake.

Finally, Damon Scott and Trushna Parekh also draw on Berlant's work in their study of a defiant memorial march marking the closure of the Gangway, a gay bar in San Francisco's Polk Gulch neighborhood that was popular with the neighborhood's poor LGBTQ residents, many of them dwellers in nearby residential hotels. Informed by the longer history of public mourning to honor the lives of friends and lovers lost to HIV/AIDS and protest their abandonment, Scott and Parekh argue that the March to Remember and Reclaim Polk Gulch offers a collective 'no' to the astonishing pace of revanchist redevelopment in San Francisco.

We hope that it is clear then, that the papers in our special issue do not simply *invert* accepted approaches to gentrification, privileging affect and the unconscious over discourse and political economy. Any analyst (psycho- or otherwise) would note that such a move is nothing more than a reactionary defence that remains trapped in an unproductive binary. Rather, each of these papers in its own way grapples with the problem of thinking the material and psychical effects of neoliberal urbanism together, to see what each makes visible through the other. This work of thinking the two registers alongside one another, and then taking the crucial step of bringing uncomfortable affects into political speech and action, is what we have in mind when we speak of the possibilities of attending to the psychic life of gentrification.

Notes

1. See C.J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC., University of North Carolina Press, 2000); G.T. Johnson and A. Lubin (eds), *Futures of Black Radicalism* (London, Verso, 2017).
2. N. Smith, *The New Urban Frontier: Gentrification and the Revanchist City* (New York, Routledge, 1996).
3. S. Lee dir., *Do the Right Thing* (New York, 40 Acres and a Mule Productions, 1989).
4. S. Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2012); S.R. Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York, New York University Press, 1999).
5. M.M. Ramirez, 'City as borderland: Gentrification and the policing of Black and Latinx geographies in Oakland', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 38.1, 2020, pp. 147–66; D.K. Seitz, 'The trouble with Flag Wars: Rethinking sexuality in critical urban theory', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39.2, 2015, pp. 151–264.
6. J.J. Schlichtman and J. Patch, 'Gentrifier, who me? Interrogating the gentrifier in the mirror', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 38.4, 2014, pp. 1491–508; I. Sachs dir., *Little Men* (Magnolia Pictures, New York, 2016).
7. H. Ashby dir., *The Landlord* (Los Angeles, United Artists, 1970).
8. S. Boone, 'The Landlord: Whose Dream Is it, Anyway?', *Slant Magazine*, 2007, <<https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/the-landlord-whose-dream-is-it-anyway/>>
9. T. Lawrence, *Life and Death on the New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983* (Durham, NC., Duke University Press, 2016); Delany, *Times Square Red*.

- 10.Persia featuring D.Plastik, 'Google Google Apps Apps', Youtube, 2013, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Ed3i9Srn-M>>
- 11.Sachs, *Little Men*; See D.K. Seitz, "Make This Adult Mess Make Sense Again": The Psychic Lives of Gentrification's Children', *Social & Cultural Geography*. Epub ahead of print 2 December 2019. DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2019.1698758.
- 12.Schulman, *Gentrification*.
- 13.N.Brenner, P.Marcuse and M.Mayer, *Cities for People, Not for Profit: Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City* (New York, Routledge, 2012).
- 14.For exceptions, see e.g. L.Bondi, 'Sexing the City', in R.Fincher and J.M. Jacobs (eds), *Cities of Difference* (New York, Guilford Press, 1998), pp. 177-200; H.Nast, 'Queer Patriarchies, Queer Racisms, International', *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 34.5, 2002, pp. 874-909; L.Kern and H.McLean, 'Undecidability and the Urban: Feminist Pathways through Urban Political Economy', *ACME* 16.3, 2017, pp. 405-26; Delany, *Times Square*; Seitz, "Make This".
- 15.K.Adeyemi, 'The Practice of Slowness: Black Queer Women and the Right to the City', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 25.4, 2019, pp. 545-67.
- 16.D.Harvey, 'The Right to the City', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27.4, 2003, pp. 939-41; Adeyemi, 'The Practice', p. 548.
- 17.Adeyemi, 'The Practice', p. 548.
- 18.Adeyemi, 'The Practice', p. 563.
- 19.H.J.Nast, 'Mapping the "Unconscious": Racism and the Oedipal Family', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 90.1, 2000, pp. 215-55; 'Mapping'; K.Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
- 20.B.T.Summers, *Black in Place: The Spatial Aesthetics of Race in a Post-Chocolate City* (Chapel Hill, NC, University of North Carolina Press, 2019), p. 146.
- 21.J.J.Giesecking, *A Queer New York: Geographies of Lesbians, Dykes, and Queers* (New York, New York University Press, 2020), p. 30.
- 22.E.L.Santner, *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life: Reflections on Freud and Rosenzweig* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 9.
- 23.D.Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (New York, Routledge, 1995); S.Pile, *The Body and the City: Psychoanalysis, Space and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 1996); L.Bondi, 'Lacanian Theory', in L.McDowell and J.Sharp (eds), *A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography* (New York, Routledge, 1999), pp. 143-45; W.Hollway and T.Jefferson, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free Association, Narrative and the Interview Method* (Thousand Oaks, Calif., Sage, 2000); J.Proudfoot, 'Anxiety and Phantasy in the Field: The Position of the Unconscious in Ethnographic Research', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 33.6, 2015, pp. 1135-52; P.Kingsbury and S.Pile (eds), *Psychoanalytic Geographies* (New York, Routledge, 2016).
- 24.S.Žižek (ed), *Mapping Ideology* (London, Verso, 1994); L.Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2011); S.Pile, 'Affect and Ideology: The Political Stake of Desire', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 31, 2019. pp. 108-11.